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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes the components of effective parenting for which substantial empirical support is available and discusses the problems inherent in attempts to determine the characteristics of effective parents in order to amend the process of socialization through the modification of parent styles. The aspects of effective parenting discussed include parental sensitivity or empathic understanding of the child, authoritative versus authoritarian and permissive parenting styles, consistency of parental discipline, parents as role models, single-parent families versus intact families, working mothers, and day care. The major problems inherent in drawing inferences about parenting from research on socialization are identified as: (1) the difficulty of determining the direction of effects in correlational data, (2) the implicit assumption that all children are equally and similarly malleable, (3) the numerous sources of socialization influence other than parents, and (4) the difficulties of investigating the content as well as the style of parental demands. (JMB)

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EFFECTIVE PARENTING IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA: SOME CAUTIONS AND SOME PRESCRIPTIONS.

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Effective parenting in contemporary America:

Some cautions and some prescriptions

As my title suggests, I am somewhat uncomfortable about attempts to distill from research findings a series of prescriptions for effective parenting. I am uneasy not because we know nothing of relevance, but because there is a distressing tendency for tentative findings to become hallowed principles, for essential qualifications to be forgotten, and more generally, for notions about one of the major inputs to the socialization process (the parents' contribution) to be portrayed as rules regarding the sole essential inputs to the process. It is crucial to recognise that there can be no universally relevant prescription for effective parenting. What is effective in any instance depends on the following three considerations: a) the goals and values of the parents; b) the characteristics of the child; and c) the norms and mores of the culture or subculture. Any description of effective parental behavior which fails to acknowledge the importance of the child's individuality, and the impact of other socializing agents (peers, schools, teachers, the media) and their implicit values, is at best misleading; at worst it is dangerously counterproductive.

This paper has two goals. The above reservations notwithstanding, I will summarize in the first section what I perceive as the principal components of effective parenting. I will discuss only the conclusions for which there is substantial empirical support, and will stress the problems inherent in attempts to translate research findings into useful advice to parents. Thereafter, I will buttress my skeptical introduction with a brief discussion of the conceptual problems inherent in attempts to determine the characteristics of effective parents and to amend the process of socialization through the modification of parental styles. I will illustrate my argument by reference to one of the best studies--that directed by Diana Baumrind of the University

of California at Berkeley. Notice that I will concern myself solely with socialization and the development of sociopersonality characteristics whereas many of the other participants may emphasize the parental facilitation of cognitive competence. I believe, however, that my reservations apply whether we focus on social or cognitive development.

THE CAUTIOUS PRESCRIPTIONS

Although I believe that one should not look to experts or researchers for easy formulae that purport to contain the essential principles of parenting, I think that it is possible to make some cautious generalizations based on what we do know about the effects of parents on children.

One key concept is clearly sensitivity or empathic understanding. Much of the work on mother-infant interaction suggests that the mother's sensitivity to infant signals (i.e., her ability to interpret the baby's cues accurately and respond appropriately) is a major predictor of the quality of the relationship they develop (e.g., Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Schaffer & Emerson, 1964; Blehar, Lieberman, & Ainsworth, 1977). The same may be true of father-infant relations, though the evidence is scanty (Schaffer & Emerson, 1964). Similarly, Baumrind's data suggest that the most effective parents--those who adopt an authoritative style--are notable for their willingness to "meet their children as persons, and maintain sufficient flexibility in the face of their child's individuality that they can learn from it the kind of parenting to which it best responds" (Lamb & Baumrind, in press). This sensitivity is probably related to the concept of nurturance which Mussen (1967) and Radin (1976) have emphasized. These researchers have shown that children are more likely to identify with warm and nurturant fathers and mothers than with hostile, distant, or rejecting parents. Though the appropriate parental behavior changes in relation to the child's age, therefore, the importance of sensitivity/empathy appears constant. This implies that effective parenting involves

guiding children and appreciating--indeed encouraging--the flowering of their individual propensities, rather than stamping in alien behavior patterns. Effective parents are able to determine the extent to which their children need guidance, and the extent to which they would benefit from the challenge of performing independently.

Unfortunately, sensitivity is a concept which is easy to describe verbally, yet remarkably difficult to concretize in a manner that may facilitate the training of parents and parents-to-be. Perhaps realistic information concerning the capacities and limitations of children of different ages would be most useful, inasmuch as it would provide parents with some basis for developing reasonable expectations. Too many books romanticize the wonder of children and the joys of parenthood; in so doing, they unrealistically portray the responsibilities and burdens of parenthood. It is easy, for example, for 'experts' to speak rapturously of the recently bathed, powdered, rested, and healthy children they see in their offices or laboratories, but parents should know that babies can be frustrating, irritating, irritable, and burdensome and that infants give precious little acknowledgement for 'services rendered' for an unconscionable length of time. This does not mean that experts should aim to dampen the enthusiasm of young parents, or depict parenthood as an impersonal mechanical process. What we want to avoid are unreasonable expectations; what we need to communicate are facts about attainments and capacities.

Perhaps the most vexing dilemma for parents concerns the appropriateness and effectiveness of discipline. Philosophers have disagreed vehemently for milennia; some have stressed the necessity of harsh molding of the child, while others have emphasized the self-actualizing propensity of children, and the dangers inherent in squelching this propensity with discipline. Baumrind's studies suggest that both extremes are undesirable: that socially competent children are more likely to come from families that are "authoritative" rather

than "authoritatian" or "permissive" (Baumrind, 1975a). Authoritative parents are those who direct or guide their children in a rational issue-oriented manner. They tend, as I noted above, to be sensitive to the child's needs and capabilities; unlike authoritarian or permissive parents, they realize that children are immature, and that they need guidance (mediated both by reward and attention, and by punishment and limit-setting) if they are ultimately to function optimally in the society.

A related modulator of familial influence is the consistency of parental demands. Nothing distorts the acquisition of socially-approved behavior more thoroughly than parents whose discipline is capricious, their attention and response unpredictable, and their wishes ill-defined. Effective parents should set reasonable and reasoned standards and should maintain these standards consistently thereafter. On the other hand--and this is why expert advice rapidly becomes confusing--they should not be inflexible and insensitive in formulating and enforcing their demands.

Successful socialization involves more than imposing demands and guiding children directly. It is increasingly apparent that what parents do <u>in front of</u> their children may be as significant as what they do <u>to</u> their children. Most children--particularly those whose parents are nurturant and accessible--are motivated to emulate their parents (Bandura, 1976; Mussen, 1967). By imitating parental models, children learn many complex behavior patterns, particularly those related to sex roles and (perhaps) morality. Although the early theoretical formulations stressed the lack of explicit reinforcement in these observational learning processes, it is evident that the effectiveness of modeling is greatly enhanced by parental encouragement of the identification, and explicit approval of the child's attempts to emulate its parents. The ideal course is to reward the motivation, while gently correcting the performance, bearing in mind the child's ability to render adult behavior

patterns.

For several reasons, childrearing is most easily and effectively performed by intact families. Single-parent families deprive children of a major role model, and make them the exclusive responsibility of a parent who lacks emotional and economic support from a spouse, and who is socially isolated. On the other hand, there is no reason to assume that nominally-intact families reliably and assuredly provide children with two socially significant and accessible parents. Children with psychologically absent fathers appear to be affected in much the same way as those whose fathers are physically absent (Blanchard & Biller, 1971; Hoffman, 1971). Marital hostility is also damaging to the personalities of young children (Lamb, 1976, p. 31). Thus intact families are reliably more effective socializing agents than single-parent families only in cases where there are two happily married and committed parents (Lamb, 1977). Furthermore, it is important neither to understate nor to overstate the difficulties faced by single parents. Most aspects of personality development involve input from a variety of sources (mothers, fathers, siblings, teachers, peers, the media) and there is no reason to believe that any one source is irreplaceable. Contributions from all are generally not necessary, while none are sufficient in and of themselves (Lamb, in press). This is so both because redundancy appears to be built into the socialization process and because others (e.g., siblings, teachers) may become adequate substitutes for the absent parents (Biller, 1971; Lynn, 1974).

There is currently great concern about the children of working mothers and about a related issue--the effects of day care on developmental processes. The topic has been debated vociferously by both proponents and opponents; meanwhile, the evidence shows that both extreme positions underestimate the complexity of the issues. The children (particularly daughters) of working mothers, we find, tend to avow less stereotyped sex-roles than the children

of full-time mothers (Hoffman, 1974; Vogel, Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkantz, 1970). In contemporary society, this is clearly a beneficial rather than a deleterious consequence. Second, children who are raised by dissatisfied women who would rather be working and pursuing careers are at greater risk for psychological damage than those whose mothers are able to combine career and family roles in the way they choose (Birnbaum, 1971; Hoffman, 1974; Yarrow, Scott, De Leeuw & Heinig, 1962). A working woman may harm her children, in other words, only to the extent that she feels guilty or resentful at the abandonment of either her family or her career (cf. Hoffman, 1974).

As far as day care is concerned, it is now fairly well established that the daily separations from parents and the associated substitute care are not in themselves inimical to the normal course of sociopersonality development. An important qualification is in order, however. Most research has been conducted in high quality day care programs, whereas most children are enrolled in inadequate if not depriving programs. Though no systematic effort has been made to compare the effects of high and low quality programs, it is significant that the only study to report ill-effects was conducted in a mediocre center (Blehar, 1974), whereas the studies reporting no ill-effects have been conducted in model University-affiliated programs (e.g., Doyle, 1975; Feldman, 1974; Schwartz, Strickland, & Krolick, 1974; Schwartz, 1975).

THE PRESCRIPTIVE CAUTIONS

Let's turn our attention now to the cautions: the reasons underlying my reservations about the inferences that can be drawn from research findings.

The major problem is one that is inherent in the correlational research strategies endemic to the study of socialization--how can we determine the direction of effects? Eminent researchers like Diana Baumrind usually begin (implicitly or explicitly) with a description of what they believe to be the

'perfect' child--the ideal outcome of the parenting process. They then seek to define parental characteristics that are correlated with the children's styles. For Baumrind, the ideal child is one who is assertive, autonomous, independent, socially competent, and not intrusive with adults, and her studies have provided reliable and replicable evidence about the characteristics and attitudes of the parents of such socially competent preschoolers (Baumrind, 1975a). In general, the most effective parents appeared to be those Baumrind called "Authoritative." These parents attempted to direct their children in a rational issue-oriented manner; they encouraged independence while also valuing conformity to cultural mores. Permissive and Authoritarian parents were not successful in producing socially competent children: They either provided insufficient guidance or thoroughly forbade independent effort, badly misjudging the developmentally-appropriate needs of their children.

At first blush, then, it appears that we have here the answer to this conference's problems: solid careful research indicating quite clearly which patterns of childrearing or parental behavior produce "appropriate" behavior patterns in young children. Unfortunately, however, Baumrind's subsequent follow-up failed to substantiate these seemingly robust findings (Baumrind, 1975b). Analyses across time failed to support the conclusion that parental practices caused reliable and predictable differences in the children's behavior. Although only preliminary findings from the longitudinal study have been reported, it appears that the differential effectiveness of the various patterns of childrearing all but disappeared. By the time her subjects had reached 9 years of age, Baumrind found no clear evidence that the children of authoritative parents were more socially competent than the children of parents with vastly different disciplinary styles.

Why the discrepancy? Well if one looks at the original studies closely, one is struck by the troubling fact that they are entirely dependent on

correlational data. In her interpretation, Baumrind had to assume that the social competence of the children at 5 years of age was a product of -- was caused by -- the behavior and attitudes of the parents. Unfortunately, parents and children were each assessed only once -- all at the same time (roughly) -- so the direction of effects is really obscure. Is it not conceivable that the apparent rationality and effectiveness of the authoritative parents was due, at least in part, to the fact that their children were significantly more socially competent, less intrusive -- in short, more manageable disciplinary problems? In other words, perhaps the parents' behavior is as much a response to the children's personality styles as a cause of them. Thus the cause of the children's desirable behavior may remain partially (or completely) unexplained.

One critical problem with research such as Baumrind's is the implicit assumption that all children are equally and similarly malleable. More crudely, certain parental practises are portrayed as the necessary and sufficient conditions for forming certain personality styles in children. This is, to my mind, an unreasonable assumption. Although it is certainly not true that the way children develop is uninfluenced by their parents (in particular) or their rearing environment (in general), we must appreciate that there are also innate differences in temperament and potential. These differences are not the sole determinants of children's personality either. The 'outcome' is dependent on an intimate and ill-understood interaction between the child's innate individual characteristics and the rearing environment. The findings of the New York Longitudinal Study illustrate this most clearly, the methodological inadequacies of the particular study notwithstanding. The children who eventually needed psychiatric attention, Thomas, Chess, and Birch (1968) found, were not simply those who were characterized from early in life by their 'difficult' temperaments nor those whose parents were characterized by maladaptive

styles, but those for whom there was a mismatch between the infants' temperament and the parents' styles.

Such an interactionist conclusion has practical as well as theoretical implications. Most important, from the point of view of this conference, is the implication that there can be no hard-written prescriptions for effective parenting, because the parental behaviors that are effective in achieving a given outcome (i.e., a child who behaves in the desired manner) will vary considerably depending on the nature of the individual child concerned. To the notion that authoritative parenting may be most effective, then, we must emphasize a qualification: Sensitivity to the needs, developmental level and individual personality of the particular child with which one is dealing is of crucial importance, as is the ability to monitor one's own behavior and demands so as to challenge but not overestimate the potential of the child.

Further qualifications are necessary when we bring into contention an additional complicating wrinkle--the societal mores. Unfortunately or fortunately, parents are not the sole arbiters of their offspring's future. Socialization is a complex process, to which parents and siblings, as well as teachers, peers, and the media all contribute. Further, socialization serves to prepare children to function independently and competently in the society. This has two implications for parents. First, to the extent that parents may have legitimate but unconventional goals for their children, they have to compete with a variety of other socializing agents most of which have a profoundly conservative function. With the possible exception of the adolescent peer group, all extrafamilial sources of influence exert strong pressures toward maintenance of the status quo (cf. Lamb & Urberg, in press). In addition, while attempting to guide the development of their offspring, 'counterculture' parents have to bear in mind that the child must one day live in a wider society in which others will expect the child to behave in accordance with different

values or mores. Parents may be forced, consequently, to compromise between what they believe to be best for their child overall, and what will be best for the child in the context of a given social framework. This, too, is likely to exert a conservative influence. Consider, for example, a 'liberated' family that rejects traditional sex-stereotyping because of the inequalities this imposes. The best-intentioned opposition to traditional sex-role stereotyping becomes considerably more muted when a hypothetical problem becomes an issue concerning how to raise one's own child. The problem is that while they may oppose "unreasonable" inequalities, (i.e., aspects of gender role) most parents wish their children to have secure gender identities--that is, to be content with and proud of their status as male or female. Since they do not know which aspects of sex-differentiating treatment are necessary to ensure secure gender identity and which are merely antecedents of aspects of gender role, parents are forced to gamble on the basis of incomplete knowledge in making a decision that may have important consequences for the course and quality of a child's life. The least risky course is to conform: consequently, parental uncertainty may have a profoundly conservative effect.

There is another issue we need to address--one that is implicit in most studies of socialization but is seldom considered directly. Is it the parents' way of posing demands in raising their children that is critical, or the content of the demands themselves? If we look closely at most of the research in this area we find a focus on style rather than substance. Investigators have conducted research on the effects or effectiveness of "punitiveness", of "permissiveness", of "nurturance" and so on, yet little research directly relevant to the concrete problems with which parents must deal. One reason for our current ignorance may be that we too often address the questions obliquely and abstractly. One consequence of this is that concepts like punitiveness are certain to be defined very differently by various researchers;

we would expect--indeed predict--discrepancies among research findings depending on the methods and definitions adopted by the investigators concerned. Clear answers that are useful to parents may be possible only when we specify what demands are being made punitively or permissively, instead of papering over a multitude of parental styles and goals with labels like "punitive" or "permissive." It matters a great deal, I suspect, whether a parent punishes a one-year-old or a four-year-old for soiling itself; to call both punitive is to ignore the most important information. Classification of the content of demands is not easy, and I suspect this is why the issue has so often been avoided. Perhaps the value itself (e.g., it is good/bad to fight back when someone hits you) is not as important as the age-appropriateness of the demand. This underscores the relation between the content of demands and parental sensitivity.

What I have said may appear to be overly negative; unnecessarily dampening the eloquent prescriptions of more zealous participants. I have enunciated no hard-and-fast rules about when, where, how, and why: indeed, I've cautioned against attempting to do so. In fact, I believe that it is both misguided and unrealistic to expect to formulate a list of practical rules to guide 'good' parents because there are many ways of being effective and the appropriate way is going to depend on the goals of the parents, their style, and the child's temperament and level of maturity. I remain, in sum, unrepentant.

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